WATCH THE CLOSING DOORS
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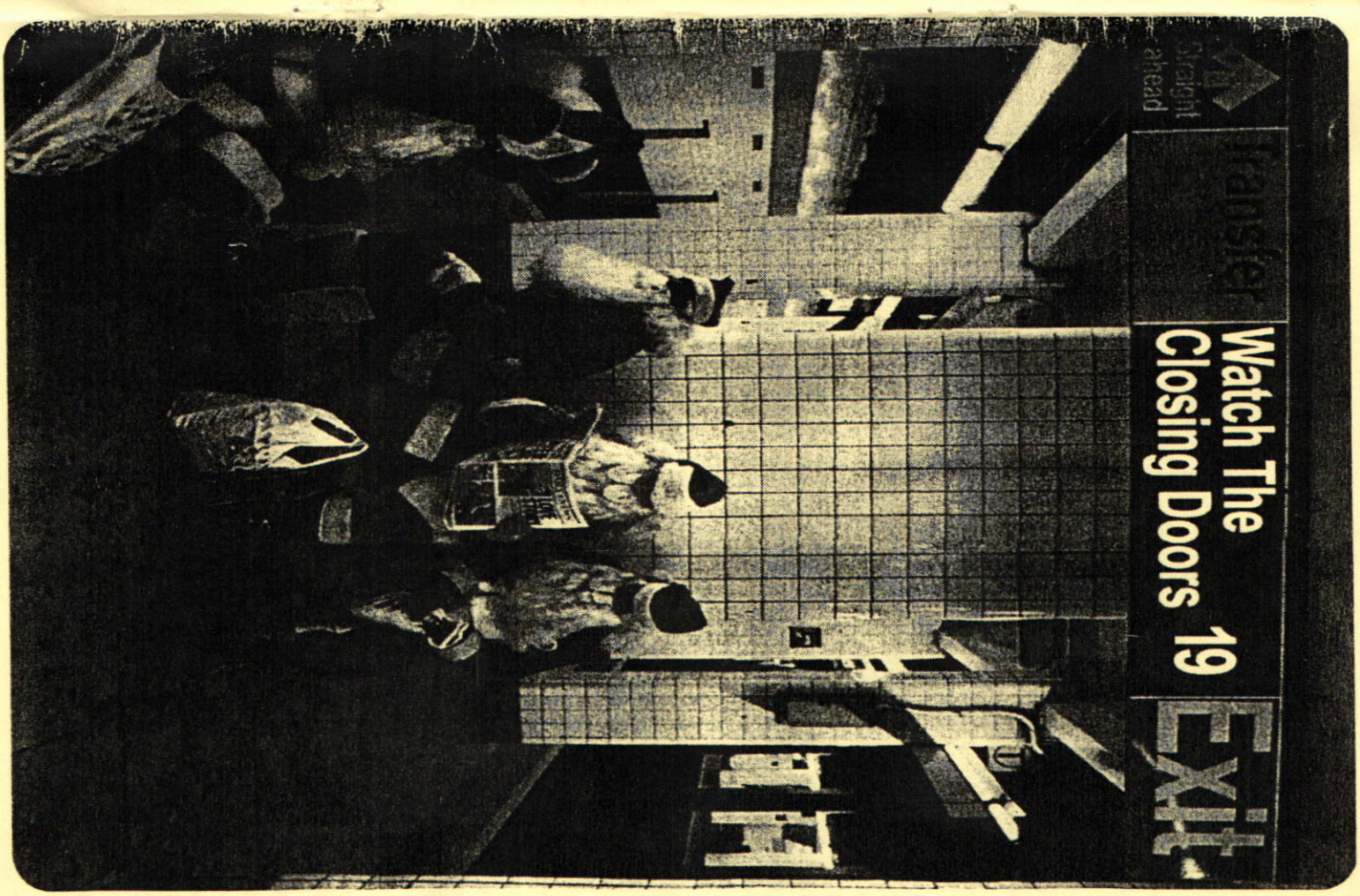
"Ho! Ho! Ho!" and $1.50 gets you on the subway in New York. Our special cover this issue was designed by Raju Singh, whose graf zine SUITABLE 4 FRAMIN' is ready and waiting for your perusal at P.O. Box 12686 Berkeley, CA 94712-2686. Now let's see what's inside...



EXPRESS BUS EXCITEMENT • Fred Argoff

One fine spring morning, I decided to head in to work a different way--via the X29 express bus. Simply to have a chance to experience this different mode of mass transit, I was willing to fork over the five and a half bucks asked for by the Transit Authority.

The X29 runs up Coney Island Avenue during rush hours. It is supposed to make its appearance at designated stops at 12-minute intervals. I'm no dummy, and I know that 15 to 20 minutes between these buses is very good time. So I stationed myself at the corner of Coney Island and Kings Highway--and before long, hey, there's the bus!

Lesson #1: by the time X29 reaches Kings Highway, you aren't seeing any wide open spaces. Lesson #2: seats are not guaranteed, even on an express bus that charges you $5.50 for the privilege of the ride. But I was only taking it for the variety, so I paid my fare and made my way rearwards.

Musta been my lucky day, because there, near the back, was an empty seat...and you may be sure that I availed myself of it, pronto. "OK," I remember thinking, "A seat on the express bus! Driver, get us into Manhattan, and be quick about it!"

Lesson #3: there are regular riders on express buses --which I learned at the next stop (Avenue J). Some person boarded, heading to the spot where I was already seated. As a matter of fact, headed right for my seat! It turned out that I had taken the last remaining seat in an area inhabited by a clique of regulars --and all conversation stopped as the Avenue J latecomer expected the seat I was occupying.

At this point, I transformed myself from student to teacher, because I was the one who dispensed Lesson #4: if I pay five and a half bucks for a seat, and I actually get to sit down, you are NOT displacing me. The cold stares and icy grimaces were wasted.

It was an uncomfortable ride into Manhattan for that bunch of regular X29 riders. I had long since begun to enjoy myself, ignoring them (and silently daring anyone to say something out loud!)

Punch line: the bus put me in midtown...taking precisely the same amount of time required of the subway. Well, it was something different. But I resolved to go back to my strap-hanging ways, spending less and dealing with real folks.

Subway Speak

Despite what a lot of people think--and have been known to say out loud sometimes--announcements made in the New York City subway aren't gibberish. They just make use of a lingo you would do well to learn. Herewith, our humble effort to interpret the information.

First of all, you must understand the dual concepts of contraction and assumption. Train crews make heavy use of each; the former in an effort to save time, and the latter because they take it for granted that passengers know where they're going. (If you don't fall into that category, you are in Trouble, you're going to get Lost, and you should have checked the Map before boarding the Train!)

OK then, time for some real-life examples. You're in Brooklyn, riding a Manhattan bound F train. When it pulls into the station at East Broadway, the conductor says, "This is East Broadway. Delancey stibidi next." In this case, stibidi = "street will be." Now honestly, we can't imagine anyone not understanding that, but we're told that there actually are such people around. Wonders truly never cease.

Let's say you're taking an R train. When it arrives at 14th Street, you may hear something like, "Union Square 4-5-6-L." The novice may expect to hear "Hut" next, followed by the snap of the football; or perhaps imagine some kind of insidious coded phrasing. It is neither, but instead, helpful notification of other lines that cross at this station. The conductor has simply eliminated words known to be superfluous, such as "transfer here for," and "trains."

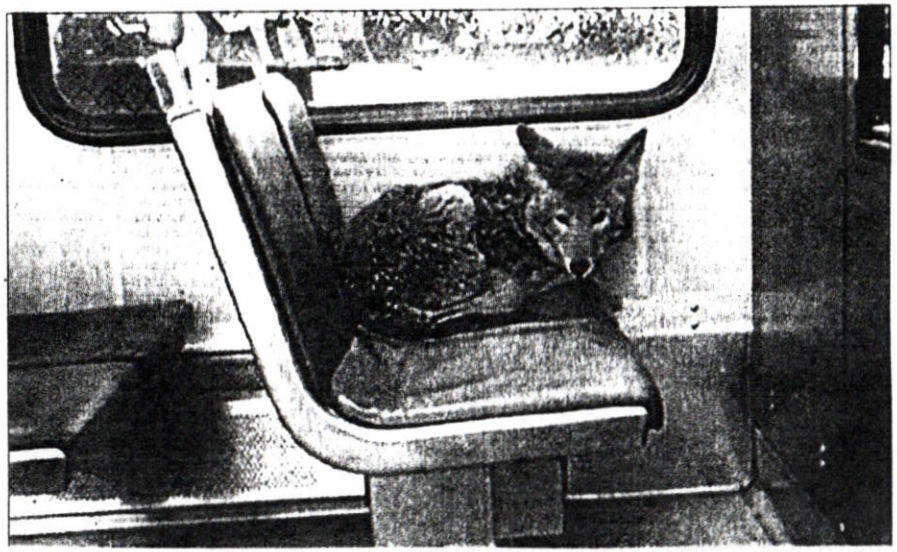
Now we are going to follow the lead of train crews and practice both contraction and assumption. We're contracting this article to avoid excessive verbiage, and assuming that you get the idea regarding public address announcements.

Hopefully, you'll be able to ride the trains like a true insider, armed with all the information you need to navigate the system. Just make sure you don't get too overconfident; in New York, we don't always take kindly to a certain smug attitude (see Bad Situations, How to Avoid.)

Below, where is the future? The future is here--polishing the rails on the L line between 8th Avenue in Manhattan and Rockaway Parkway in Brooklyn.

One of the first high-tech, 21st century model R-143 trains enters the Rockaway Parkway station.

JUST BEFORE LABOR DAY, 2001, California Governor Gray Davis dedicated a new stretch of freeway just outside Los Angeles...then announced that it would be the state's last for some time to come. California, the state that virtually single-handedly created "car culture," is now officially promoting mass transit. Please check for signs of an imminent apocalypse.



Above, only fare-paying customers get to ride the MAX light rail line in Portland, Oregon. This coyote saw open doors at the Portland International Airport station, and figured to hop on for a ride. (Wildlife specialists made a quick roundup, and released it outside the security fence.)

From the wires: *CALCUTTA (Reuters) — The City of Calcutta will start playing calming classical music at its subway stations to prevent passengers from trying to commit suicide.*

Someday, we would like to do a grand tour of the world's subways. However, after spotting this little item in the N.Y. Daily News (9/8/01) we're not sure if we'd like to make a stop in Calcutta. What must their subway be like if the thinking runs this way.

Below, interesting arrangement of seats on BART shows what the designers had in mind--and also, what they didn't.

In addition to the usual mass transit configurations of seats placed to face across the car, and front-facing seats by windows, BART also features groupings of four seats that face each other. If you're riding the train with family or friends, this can be quite an amenity.

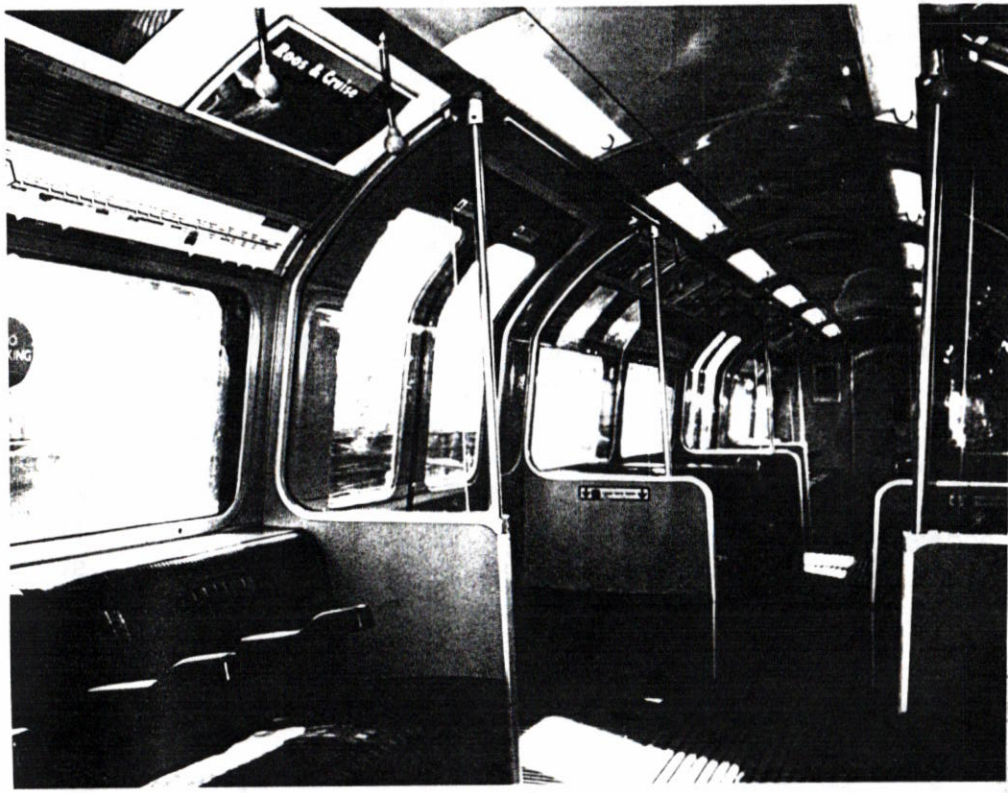
The other side of the coin, though, is that if you're not part of a group, you might find yourself forced to sit facing strangers. Oh, we know: these groupings were put on the trains with the idea that a person by him- or herself wouldn't take such a seat. But it seems to us that someone wasn't looking ahead to the possibility that the train might get crowded.

Above, workhorse of the IRT division for many years, the R-36 cars first went into service in 1964. During the period 1982-5, much of the R-36 fleet was remanufactured and outfitted with the distinctive circular ceiling air-conditioning units you can see here. These cars also have accessible end windows, which makes for a great way to see the city, if you're so fortunate as to get that favored spot.

This photo was taken on a downtown #5 train, having just left 149th Street/Grand Concourse station in The Bronx.

Below, this, on the other hand, is an R-46 car, shown in service on the F line in Brooklyn. The fleet of R-46s joined the system beginning in 1975, and were rebuilt during 1989-91. These cars are similar to the R-68 and R-68A models, which you see running on the B and D lines most often.

As far as we're concerned, the feature of R-46s that sets them above all earlier cars is the front- and rear-facing seats alongside the picture windows; they are usually the first ones taken. (By the time the train in this photo reaches downtown Brooklyn, there won't be so much room in the car!)



Above, why don't we continue our discussion of inferences from the page opposite? This time, however, we're riding the Piccadilly Line of London's Underground.

It's interesting to imagine what the designers of these trains had in mind--note that the row seats are very clearly intended for a specific number of people. The arm rests make sure of that! No matter how many people are crowded into the train and forced to stand, those fortunate enough to get a seat will not be crushed.

Of course, subway systems are great equalizers of the populace in any city. You can't get a seat on the Piccadilly Line and feel smug. That's because you may still have to negotiate the crowd when the train gets to your station, and it's time to get up.

POLKA TIME!

"I don't want her
You can have her
She's too fat for me,
She's too fat for me,
She's too fat for me..."

What's that? You say you're not especially in the mood for a polka--particularly the Too Fat Polka? Oh, hell, then you probably wouldn't have enjoyed the trip we took not long ago on a G train crossing Brooklyn.

The festivities got started when our train pulled into the Nassau Avenue station. Now, for anyone out there in readership land who isn't familiar with Brooklyn: Nassau Avenue runs through Greenpoint, a neighborhood known for its large Polish contingent.

A man boarded the train carrying an accordion. But his accordion wasn't inside a case. It was right out there in the open and, in combination with the rather jolly expression on the man's face, we had an idea that our plain, ordinary subway ride was about to perk up.

Hardly had the doors closed than the man hefted the accordion and launched into a rousing rendition of the above-quoted Too Fat Polka.

Now, anytime there's a performer on the subway (sometimes you have to put that word in quotation marks, because their antics might not fit your definition of a performance), it's true that a certain number of passengers will get right into the spirit of things. This is what happens on our G train, as we advance across Brooklyn and the Too Fat Polka reverberates through the car.

After half a dozen stations, however, the novelty of the act begins to wear off. A passenger seated across the way wonders aloud, "If only he'd play something else."

The Leader of the Festivities hears this--and it's not what he wants to hear. "You don't like polka?" he jabs the question at the passenger. "I play polka!"

And he begins another round of the Too Fat Polka, only louder and, if possible, with more emphasis.

Our point of departure is the Hoyt/Schermerhorn Street station. It is a relief not to have polka music pounding in our head, but at the same time, our ride on the arriving C train is dull by comparison.

SUBWAY DIARY

June 20, 2000--On a PATH train returning to New York from Newark. At Journal Square, someone on the platform is not letting the doors close. Conductor shouts over PA, "Watch the closing doors!" which makes the delay fully worthwhile as far as we're concerned.

June 22--Back on PATH, but this time, to Exchange Place station in downtown Jersey City to catch the brand-new Hudson-Bergen Light Rail (which will have a separate, and much more extensive writeup.) Moment of surrealism: there are NO indications anywhere in the PATH system that the light rail line exists at all. If you don't know about it beforehand, you aren't going to pick up any clues.

June 25--On an L train crossing Brooklyn, where a ragged, reeking man was attempting to sell a copy of the Daily News. Heaven only knows where he got the paper because it looked (and it smelled) like he'd fished it out of a sewer. He did not seem to be able to understand why he had no customers. When he sauntered off the train at Myrtle Avenue, at least he took the paper with him.

July 4--G train to Greenpoint, where it is possible to view the big fireworks show minus the horrendous crowds that gather at such sites as the East Side of Manhattan and Brooklyn Heights. At Classon Avenue a couple boards the train well into the spirit of the occasion. They wear a minimum of clothing, but a maximum of red, white and blue body paint.

July 8--Went exploring on the only remaining portion of the Fulton Street el system still in service: the Lefferts Boulevard branch of the A train. Had quite a wait at Grant Avenue for an older style train with a front-facing window on the lead car, but the view was well worth the waiting.

July 9--Bus across Brooklyn specifically to catch the #3 train at its New Lots Avenue terminus. Boarding, a passenger already seated looks us over in astonishment and says, "Damn! I don't remember the last time I saw a white man get on the train at this station." But the first rule in New York City is: anything is possible. And you should never act surprised.

Isn't it interesting, how the word "subway" conjures up all kinds of big-city imagery? Yet in practically every city with a subway system, you can ride to places outside the central business district that don't fit the image at all.

Above, Ongar station on London's Central line. This station was actually built in 1865!

Below, Kings Highway station on the Culver line (that is, the F train) in Brooklyn.

21st Street

There are two different stations along 21st Street in the Long Island City section of Queens. The older one is served by the IND crosstown line, and opened in 1933. We are going to visit the newer one this time; it's a joint IND-BMT station, and only went into service at the end of 1988. It comes along with some wonderful history...

In the early 1970s, as part of an ambitious series of subway expansion proposals, the idea was put forth for a Queens Super Express. It would come in from Manhattan, make a quick stop just on the Queens side of the East River, then go more than halfway across the borough, following the Long Island Expressway's right-of-way, making its next stop in Flushing. (This, by the way, would have created the most awesome express run ever imagined!)

There was just one small problem: the Super Express was given a price tag of $900 million. Not surprisingly, it was among the first of the ambitious plans to be cancelled. Strangely enough, however, the first part of the line was actually constructed. Branches from both the Broadway and 6th Avenue lines form the 63rd Street subway in Manhattan, the station on Roosevelt Island was opened, and the jumping-off point in Queens, 21st Street station, was also put in service.

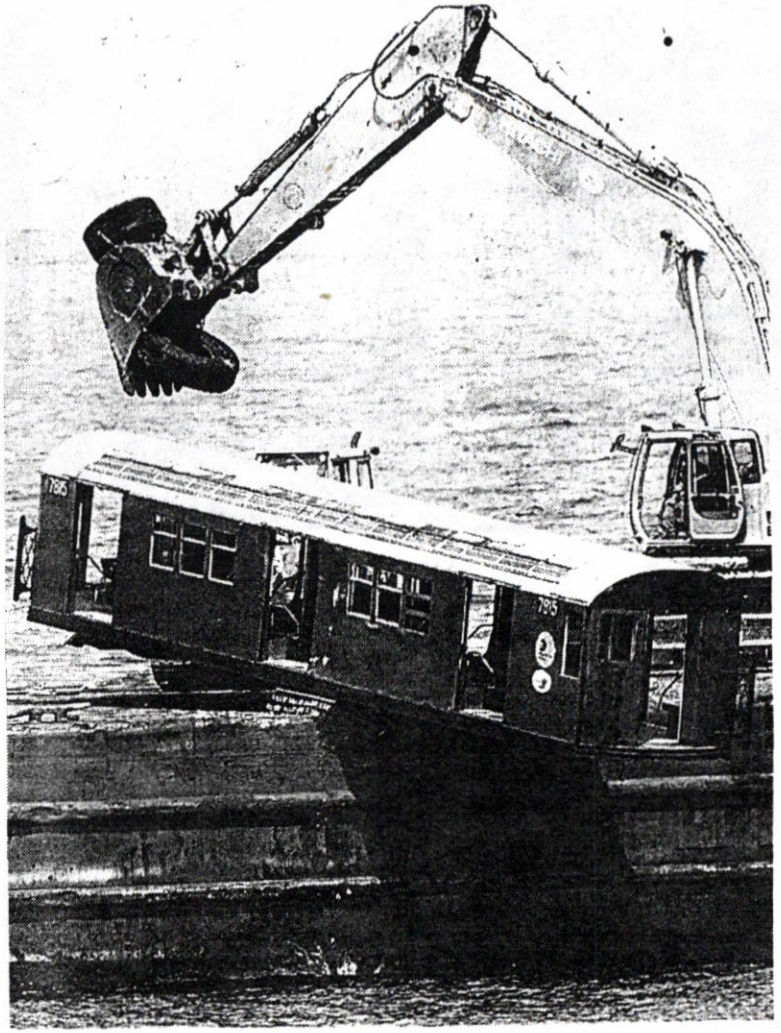
It remained as a somewhat inexplicable terminus for subway service--without connections to any other lines --for a shade over 12 years. Then, early in 2001, the connection to the Queens Boulevard line was completed and voilà...21st Street became an intermediate stop on the line. F trains were rerouted from the 53rd Street tunnel to the one under 63rd, and the station at 21st Street now figures to get many times more use than it did during the first 12 years of its existence.

In terms of design, well, let's just say that this station doesn't look like most others around the city. It's thoroughly modern; in fact, you have to make a conscious effort not to imagine yourself riding the subway in some European capital when your train arrives at 21st Street.

So, while we can do no more than imagine how much fun a ride on the Super Express would've been, it is possible to visit a station that was part of the plans.

Below, before anyone will support your plans for an elevated railway, you must convince the skeptical populace that it is both possible and safe to run a "train in the sky." This Charles Harvey did, on December 7, 1867.

The modest line that Harvey built on the lower West Side of Manhattan opened in 1870, and eventually metamorphosed into the Ninth Avenue el, New York's first. It also touched off a boom in elevated construction that lasted half a century.



The "redbird" cars (called that for their paint scheme) have been polishing IRT rails in New York for more than 30 years. Now, though, they're scheduled for replacement--but will not all be consigned to the scrap heap, as you see above.

Twenty-seven of the venerable cars have been put to sea off Cape Henlopen in Delaware, where they will have a valuable new life as the foundation for an artificial reef.